DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 406 EA 032 083

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TITLE	Developing Effective Partnerships To Support Local Education.
INSTITUTION	Brown Univ., Providence, RI. Annenberg Inst. for School Reform.
SPONS AGENCY	Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, PA.; Rockefeller Foundation, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2002-06-00
NOTE	13p.
AVAILABLE FROM	School Communities That Work, 895 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003. Tel: 212-375-9627; Fax: 212-375-9427. Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Box 1985, Providence, RI 02912. Tel: 401-863-1897; Fax 401-863-1290; Web site: http://www.schoolcommunities.org. For full text: http://www.schoolcommunities.org/images/Partnerships.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accountability; Administrative Change; Administrative Organization; *Community Involvement; Educational Equity (Finance); Elementary Secondary Education; Outcomes of Education; *Partnerships in Education; *School Community Relationship; *School Districts; School Support; Services; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the vision and goals of the School Communities That Work task force. This group envisions a new kind of school district: the local education support system. It marshals all of a city's resources to provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions; ensures that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and makes decisions and holds people throughout the system accountable with indicators of school and district performance and practices. The task force identified two approaches to forming effective partnerships in education, including assessing and aligning partner services to promote both results and equity, and considering all partners' current activities and future plans from a youth engagement and development perspective. Although these approaches are common to effective partnerships, they need strong, consistent leadership to sustain them. They also must begin with the desired results in mind, build civic capacity, distribute accountability among partners, make good use of data, be honest about partners' individual needs and resources, seek out and listen to students, form meaningful relationships with parents, and pool resources. Continuation of the system is achieved when partners reach out to new members and develop long-term structural and institutional supports. (RT)

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Developing Effective Partnerships to Support Local Education

School Communities that Work:
A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

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SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK

An Initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

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School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts

was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, to examine an element of the public education system that has often been overlooked: the urban school district. Its primary goals are to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.

To help imagine what high-achieving school communities would look like and how to create them, the Task Force convened influential leaders from the education, civic, business, and nonprofit communities to study three critical areas: building capacity for teaching and learning; developing family and community supports; and organizing, managing, and governing schools and systems.

The lead writer of this article was Ellen Foley, Principal Associate, Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

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Support for this work was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation.

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School districts and their communities do not exist independently of each other, even though they are commonly viewed as separate entities. Even where districts are stereotypically remote and bureaucratic, they have an impact on the communities in which they exist, and vice versa. Understanding that connection is difficult because there are multiple communities within every city or school district catchment area. Districts – through their schools, boards, and central offices – operate at many different levels of the community, and they affect and are affected by individuals, schools, parents, civic groups, community-based organizations, and city agencies, among others. The complexity and importance of these relationships motivated the SCHOOL COMMUNITIES THAT WORK task force to include developing family and community supports as one of our three major focus areas.

Our work as a task force has led us to conclude that it is unfair to expect school districts *as we know them* to support the ambitious goals we are advocating for schools and for schoolchildren. In order to achieve both high academic results and equity for all a systems' schools, we envision a new kind of school district – what we call a local education support system – that marshals all a city's resources to fulfill three functions:

- provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions;
- ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions;
- make decisions and holding people throughout the system accountable with indicators of school and district performance and practices.

Of course, this is much easier said than done. Many school districts are overwhelmed with new state and federal demands for accountability in student achievement. Though it may seem counterintuitive to adopt a broader focus, we argue that working in large-scale partnerships is the best way to achieve ambitious student-performance goals.

Advocating this kind of partnership is hardly new advice. Developing partnerships among city agencies and community-based organizations is rhetorically very popular and many efforts that seek to increase it – integrated services, service co-location, and mayoral councils on child and family issues, to name a few – have been attempted throughout the country. With a few exceptions, these efforts have not lived up to expectations.

In this document, we draw on lessons from effective partnerships as well as on the experience of Task Force members involved in developing or studying partnerships. We describe new ways of thinking that undergird the individual and joint work of partners involved in effective partnerships and identify principles for supporting their development and sustainability.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this document we use the term *effective partnerships* because it is a simple way to describe what we want to create and because it focuses attention on the results of partnership, not on partnership for partnership's sake. However, the term is imperfect in a number of ways. First, to some, partnerships suggest only two individuals or organizations, but we envision a much broader, multipartner effort. Additionally, calling them effective partnerships suggests a level of success that is static and unchanging. That is hardly the reality. Even partnerships that have continued success evolve and require close attention. Partners must constantly ask themselves what value they add to children's lives and consistently strive to increase their contribution. Please bear these caveats in mind.

New Ways of Thinking about District-Community Partnerships

The work of the Task Force has made it clear that effective partnerships involve more than just collaboration among school districts and other community organizations. We have identified new approaches to serving children, youth, and families that can act as catalysts to form effective partnerships and can be further reinforced through the actual work of the partnership to continue to build its effectiveness.

These new approaches not only undergird the joint work of the partnership, but also the approaches of the individual partners. They include

- assessing and aligning their services to promote not only *results*, but *equity* as well;
- considering all their current activities and future plans from a *youth engagement and development* perspective.

We describe both of these new ways of thinking about education and other supports and services to children and youth in detail below.

Results and Equity

Few would argue against the statement that all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, primary language, or family income, deserve a safe and enriching path through childhood so that they can grow to be adults with fulfilling, caring, and productive lives. But figuring out how to achieve these results for all children is challenging in a society still struggling with racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination, especially when the pursuit of equity is often perceived as coming at the expense of excellence. Lessons from schools, social service agencies, and other community organizations demonstrate that results do not have to come at the expense of equity, and vice versa. Indeed, we believe that both goals must be pursued in tandem if all children are to reach the ambitious expectations to which they deserve to be held.

However, ensuring equivalent results for all children requires that some children receive more and different services, supports, and opportunities than others. Providing the same services for all will not suffice, and continuing to offer the least to those who need the most is morally and practically untenable.

Most urban communities are not organized to provide services, supports, and opportunities for children and youth efficiently or equitably. The least-experienced teachers work in schools attended by children who need the most academic support; recreation opportunities are limited in neighborhoods that have the greatest need for safe areas for children and youth to play; and often health services are inadequate in zones where children and youth are most at risk for chronic illness or injury. Adopting an emphasis on results and equity means redirecting supports and services to those who need them most.

Child/Youth Engagement and Development

Connell, Gambone, and Smith describe children and youth as "assets in the making" whose "development [is] dependent on a range of supports and opportunities coming from family, community, and the other institutions that touch them." They note that "when supports and opportunities are plentiful, young people can and do thrive; when their environments are deficient or depleted, youth tend not to grow and progress."[1]

[1] Connell, J. P., M. A. Gambone, and T. J. Smith (2000). "Youth Development in Community Settings: Challenges to Our Field and Our Approach." In P. J. Benson and K. J. Pittman (Eds.), *Trends in Youth Development* (Boston: Kluwer Academic); and in Public/Private Ventures (Eds.), *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions* (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures).

Key to providing the appropriate supports and opportunities for children and youth is having a firm understanding of what they need for healthy development. School-age children and youth must of course have their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter met, but they also need to feel safe, to belong, to have close relationships with peers and adults, and to have a say in and contribute to the world around them. When these needs are met, children are more likely to be engaged in whatever it is they are doing – academic work, an after-school club, community service, or a part-time job. Active engagement then leads to greater learning and growth, not just physically and cognitively, but also socially, morally, and emotionally.

Unfortunately, many service providers, including many schools and school districts, have not designed their services to capitalize on this interrelationship. In the name of "focus" or "get-tough" remedies, services are instead designed to "fix" children or to develop competency in a single area, often disregarding the effect on the genuine engagement, participation, and investment of youth in the activity. These approaches might have some positive effects, but they are inadequate because they do not treat engagement as a key part of development.

For example, developing students' academic or cognitive skills is the most important goal of school systems, but the effort is more likely to be successful and sustainable when they are designed with children's developmental needs in mind. To take these needs into account, a school district or local education support system – before implementing any education reform – would examine the reform's effect on student engagement and participation. Educators throughout the system would be aware that the most successful students share the following characteristics: they have a sense of belonging to their school and to the larger community; they have personal relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults; and they have some say about how they spend their time and about what they learn. Education reforms that were designed only to improve student achievement on standardized tests, but not to address student motivation and participation, would be revised or abandoned. Focusing on engagement in learning is not an end, but is a means for improving student performance, developing greater depths of conceptual understanding, and encouraging resourcefulness when faced with unfamiliar tasks or problems.

Using New Thinking to Grow a Partnership

As noted earlier, these new ways of thinking – an emphasis on results and equity, and on child/youth development and engagement – are catalysts for the creation of effective partnerships. These approaches were present in at least a rudimentary form in the initial stages of the partnerships we studied. However, it is not necessary for these elements to be fully in place to begin a partnership that can grow to be an effective one; none of the partnerships we studied exhibited these elements in full from the outset. The joint work of partnership reinforces and supports the development of these essential elements, which continue to increase the effectiveness of the partnership as the work progresses.

Design Principles for Developing Effective Partnerships

The Task Force is confident that it has identified two approaches to its work – an emphasis on results and equity, and an emphasis on student engagement and development – that are common to effective partnerships. But the more challenging task has been to explain why some partnerships develop and build on these approaches and others do not. What makes one partnership effective and another inconsequential?

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Drawing on our individual and collective work, as well as on the work of colleagues, we have identified design principles for developing effective partnerships. Though we feel that these principles are common to successful efforts, it is important to note that every city is unique. Because each community context is so critical, so specific, and so varying, precise formulas and definitions aren't useful. There is no one best way to build an effective partnership, but these common design principles should provide guidance to communities that hope to do so.

Effective partnerships have champions.

The partnership includes or is convened by leaders who are committed to it and who have the power to legitimize its role. While there is no one ideal governance structure, all of the effective partnerships we studied were led by powerful individuals. Their power comes from different sources – they can be elected officers, grassroots organizers, or key leaders who influence policy through their status or knowledge rather than through elected office. Wherever the power comes from, the success of the partnership depends on it.

Effective partnerships begin with the ends in mind.

Partners work together to identify and agree upon the desired results for children and youth. Many change and improvement efforts involving multiple players or sectors break down over disagreements about day-to-day implementation of new behaviors and programs. It may not be possible to completely prevent this. However, clear, up-front agreement on results enables mapping backward from those results to the services and opportunities required to achieve them, to the responsibilities of all partners, and to the baseline data required to assess progress.

Effective partnerships build civic capacity.

Stone describes civic capacity as "the mobilization of stakeholders in support of a communitywide cause."[3] Partners should take advantage of any preexisting civic capacity to initiate the process of community members and groups working together to address a common problem. But civic capacity is also further strengthened as this work progresses.

Building civic capacity around educational issues is a process with several stages. First, mobilization needs to occur around a problem seen in broad enough terms to concern people across different sectors of the community. A shared concern can build connections between actors who otherwise might go their separate ways, each pursuing a different agenda. The concern could be about a dismal level of educational achievement in the city's schools, for instance, or about unmet needs of children and youth. At the early stage, the important step is for the partners to agree that the problem needs to be addressed.

In the next stage of building civic capacity, partners develop a common definition of the matter of concern and begin to move toward concrete plans of action. This step is critical to overcoming issues of turf and political concerns related to unions, race, etc. For example, several groups in a community might agree that a rising number of school dropouts plays a major part in the district's low educational performance. But each group might view the problem differently. School leaders might worry about accountability provisions that hold them accountable for graduation rates; police and safety officers might point out the rise in petty crime by idle youth; and youth themselves might complain of a lack of interest in courses that don't seem relevant or prepare them for higher education.

[3] Stone, C. N. (Ed.) (1998). *Changing Urban Education*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, p. 15.

By working together to take into consideration each other's view of the issue, members of effective partnerships develop a broader and shared understanding of the problem. For this reason, partnerships should not be narrowly constituted; and when school reform is the focal issue, it is particularly important that parents have a prominent voice in the partnership arrangement.

Mobilizing around a common problem and developing a shared understanding of the problem leads to the third stage of building civic capacity: addressing the common problem. Effective partners work proactively, to prevent problems from becoming crises, and reactively, to respond when inevitable crises occur.

Effective partnerships distribute accountability among partners.

It is not only schools and school districts that fail their students; most institutional providers are less effective than the children and youth they serve need them to be. School districts' difficulties in instituting high standards and assessing whether their students are successfully meeting them have been highly visible, but other provider institutions also have difficulty conceptualizing what a set of performance standards might be. Two other frequently discussed difficulties of school districts are providing professional development that helps their staffs become more effective practitioners, and stretching limited resources. Other community institutions also have these types of problems.

Acting under a guiding principle of distributed accountability, service providers and their stakeholders, instead of blaming problems on each others' shortcomings, would jointly assess effectiveness, identify what must be improved, and define the actions to be taken. They would recognize that most of their valued goals require efforts from more than one of the participants in the partnership.

School districts' efforts to raise students' cognitive capacities depend on effective competency development by other community institutions, and the other community institutions need effective schools to buttress their own developmental work. Distributed accountability means everyone in the partnership willingly shares responsibility for making the partnership work and for what happens when it doesn't.

For accountability to be effectively shared, each desired common goal must be framed broadly enough so that all the players at the table have a clear role to play in meeting it. For example, if the goal is framed as improving students' reading scores, then the school district might be seen as the only responsible entity. But if the goal is framed as increasing citywide literacy, then other groups might see, or could be helped to see, how they might be able to contribute to improving the outcomes. Working with libraries and other institutions to sponsor family reading nights, making inexpensive books available to families at grocery stores or via the advertisements that come through direct mail, working with local media to do public service announcements on literacy, making sure that the recreation department and youth sports organizations know there is an epidemic of illiteracy, or developing adult and family literacy classes in the workplace or at elementary schools are all examples of ways that various community sectors can become accountable for improving citywide literacy outcomes.

We, as educators and citizens interested in education reform, need to imagine and then create examples that suggest how communities and community institutions can hold their schools accountable; we also need to recognize that, while school districts are important actors in improving educational supports and opportunities for children and youth, they are not the only actors, nor the only group responsible. Effective partnerships among school districts, par-

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ents, and other community members and groups define and distribute responsibilities, helping to ensure that each service-provision sector, and particularly public education, is connected in a continuous dynamic of evaluation and improvement. Some communities have used memorandums of understanding, contracts, and letters of agreement to distribute accountability and to help all parties expand their role to improving results for children and youth.

Effective partnerships make good use of data.

One clear lesson of effective partnerships is that data – from standardized tests, surveys, and budgets to interviews, focus groups, and anecdotal evidence – are powerful. Partners can use data on child and youth outcomes and other measures of program effectiveness to mobilize support for their efforts, manage programs, and create cross-sector accountability. Analyzing and publicizing outcome and utilization data from schools, libraries, parks, and other public services can catalyze wide civic involvement in and advocacy for child and family issues. Thorough needs assessments can provide sound direction on how to improve services. Deliberate examination of data can diminish the impact of more subjective factors such as personality and politics on difficult choices about service provision or redistribution. Appraising results regularly and leveraging data that already exist can help partners hold each other accountable for improved service delivery. Reliable, shared data can be used to plan, to evaluate, to understand trends, and to map service availability.

But data alone will not galvanize communities, especially if it is used irresponsibly. As much as data can empower, it can also disable. Effective partnerships engage in frank discussions of data security, ownership, and access. The partnership's collection and use of data is driven by the needs of the community, not of the service providers.

Effective partnerships are honest about partners' individual needs and resources.

The importance of trust to the development and sustenance of effective partnerships cannot be exaggerated. Partners need to be frank about the interests they bring to the partnership and what they need to get from it. While there is no recipe to develop trust, one key strategy is to demonstrate as early as possible that everyone in the partnership can get something from it. Additionally, honoring commitments and being honest about the plans, resources, and needs of each organization can expand and deepen trust.

Effective partnerships seek out and listen to students.

In many effective partnerships, members recount hearing youth describe what they want and need from their schools and communities as seminal experiences. These partnerships engage youth through focus groups and by including youth representatives in key leadership, decision-making, and implementing roles.

Effective partnerships seek out meaningful relationships with parents.

No partnership, either within or outside of the school system, has greater impact on the educational success of children and youth than the partnership between parents and the school. Effective partnerships consider parent involvement and parent engagement as a top priority and seek ways to provide meaningful and relevant opportunities for parents to fully participate as allies, advocates, and leaders in their children's education and in the partnerships that impact them. Effective partnerships view parent participation as essential and provide numerous ways for parents to access their school and community partners.

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Effective partnerships pool resources.

Too often agencies from different sectors that serve youth needs – schools, police, recreational agencies, youth social welfare services, etc. – have been pitted against one another in a fight for funding. In effective partnerships, partners rally together to garner adequate funding. They must work out the ground rules so that sectors are not forced to be competitive in seeking and raising funding. Additionally, groups involved in the partnership should contribute personnel and fiscal resources toward addressing the common problem. It is often helpful to hire jointly funded staff. This is particularly true with initiatives that involve school districts. Hiring an individual who works in the school district, has credibility with educators, and reports jointly to the district leadership and to a leading public agency or community-based organization has been an effective strategy in many communities with promising partnerships.

DEFINING EFFICIENCY AS GREATER IMPACT RATHER THAN COST SAVINGS

Ideally, the use of these partnership principles will lead to greater efficiency in the provision of services. In the past, calls for integrated services or school-community collaborations emphasized the potential economic savings that would result; but recent efforts have demonstrated that these promises were overstated. Partnership does not often result in savings for public coffers; indeed, collaborations often require more effort and time for the partners involved. Instead, partnerships can offer efficiencies in the use of resources by maximizing their impact.

Operating Principles for Sustaining Effective Partnerships

Developing effective partnerships is hard, but sustaining them is harder. Ideally, all the individuals involved in an effective partnership would maintain their positions and their relationships in order to ensure continued success, but that is rarely the reality. Civic leaders lose elections or face term limits; political appointees change with election cycles; superintendents are fired or move to other school districts; social service agencies and schools face turnover; community members move; parents become less engaged when their children graduate; businesses succeed and fail. Additionally, funding levels, community needs, and political support ebb and flow. How do effective partnerships survive under these challenging circumstances? Below we identify principles for sustaining effective partnerships.

Partners reach out to new members.

As noted above, the importance of trust cannot be exaggerated. Effective partnerships have members who trust each other and who work together well. When circumstances change and new members are brought into the partnership, longer-term members deliberately and proactively seek to develop trust, educate them about the work of the partnership, and establish good working relationships with them.

Partners develop long-term structural and institutional supports.

Embedding trust in institutions in different sectors and roles can only be accomplished if it is developed structurally, so it is not dependent on key individuals or charismatic leaders. For example, some partnerships share management- information systems and finance and budgeting procedures, so that collaboration becomes a natural part of their work,

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not an add-on. Also, some partnerships incorporate collaboration into individual job descriptions and seek staff who are interested in partnership.

Partners are realistic about progress and celebrate "small wins."

Improving child and youth outcomes won't happen overnight. Members' genuine commitment to help children, as well as political pressures for a "quick fix," often spur groups that are collaborating to improve conditions for children and youth to make promises they can't keep. Effective partnerships build in time for planning, for developing trust, for coming to a shared understanding of a problem, and, most importantly, for action. Part of the role of the partners is to educate the public, the media, and the political powers in their community about how much progress is realistic from year to year. Effective partnerships acknowledge the incremental progress they make and celebrate "small wins."

Commitment to Action

We have described our vision of how large-scale community partnerships can play a vital role in developing and supporting a new kind of school district – the local education support system – that ensures results and equity for all children.[3] Effective, broadly based partnerships are essential to addressing the educational, youth-support, and development issues involved in redesigning school districts.

School districts can play a primary role in developing these partnerships, and different kinds of partnerships may be needed for different starting points. Our commitment is to work closely with districts and their communities to bring about our vision, so that all young people can grow up to become knowledgeable, productive, and caring adults.

[3] For a more extensive description of the Task Force's vision, see Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2002), *School Communities that Work for Results and Equity*. Providence, RI: AISR.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2000)